Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis: De/constructing Postcolonial Discourses

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Synthesis through Scholarship: My Experience with the Research Process

The assignment given to our International Relations class was to craft a polemic essay analyzing an issue in world politics, historical or present, from the various theoretical perspectives that we learned and discussed in our course. I chose to research and write about the Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar, - the genocide and forced statelessness of the Rohingya Muslim ethnic minority group at the hands of the Burmese military and state, taking from both postcolonial and post-structural theories in deconstructing the rhetoric and discourses surrounding multiple aspects of the conflict. This decision was informed by the immediacy of the genocide, as well as by my own background as a first-generation Burmese American whose positionality and diasporic experience was very much so informed by the nationalism that I write about in the polemic. As such, the research process entailed a great deal of un/learning as I progressed.

My research process had three goals: firstly, I sought to find sources and materials that could augment the basic knowledge that I already had about the history of Myanmar. These included acknowledgements of the government's regime changes and differing names between Burma and Myanmar, aspects that a Burmese person "knows" but ones that still need to be rooted in research. Secondly, my hope was to find enough quality peer-reviewed scholarly sources concerning the Rohingya Crisis – I held a few concerns as the conflict is ongoing at the time of writing, and there is usually a long turnaround in scholarship following conflict. Luckily, my searches through the Worldcat Discovery tool yielded a plethora of scholarship from the past few years on the topic, most notably through the JSTOR and Project MUSE databases. Lastly, I aimed to connect the existing research on the crisis to established conventions in Postcolonial Theory as well as possibly build comparative connections to other conflicts. Through the same databases, I was able to achieve these aims and synthesize my research in a manner that was only made possible by the array of information through the library's databases.

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Perhaps the most widely-known issue pertaining to contemporary Myanmar is that of its military and government's long-standing persecution of the Rohingya people, a minority Muslim ethnic group living in Myanmar's western Rakhine State, in a conflict that has become regional with its effects felt in other South and Southeast Asian states (Nawab, 2017). The persecution of the Rohingya people in Myanmar is intrinsically rooted in the institutions, rhetoric, and ethnologies originating from its history as a former British colony. Burmese nationalism, seen during British administration and continuing through postcolonial nation-building to the present, has largely excluded Rohingya people from its aims and narratives by constructing discourses that render them stateless. This polemic seeks to examine the atrocities from a postcolonial and poststructual framework and reconcile the past with the present.

Myanmar, formerly officially known as Burma, was under British colonial rule from the 19th century until independence in 1948. A nation-state was established following independence, and in 1962, a military coup installed a military junta that ruled in various iterations up until 2011. Myanmar's first credibly-elected civilian government came into office in 2016 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). Under colonial rule, the British administration implemented aspects of their institutionalism onto the local peoples as a means of more effectively governing the land on their terms. This imposition of Eurocentric values immortalized the presence of the British long after their departure from Myanmar, and the modern Burmese census is such an example. The most recent census, conducted by the Burmese government in 2014, utilized the same ethnic categorization outlined by the British during the days of their census taking (Ferguson, 2015). This is noteworthy in the sense of a former colony continuing practices and perpetuating values taken from their colonizer; this phenomenon will be additionally explored throughout this polemic.

A notable ethnic group that migrated to Myanmar through British colonial rule were Indian people, who primarily took up positions within the colonial administration (Burke, 2016 & Nawab, 2017). In the eyes of native-born Burmese, Indian people in their roles as civil servants for the British Empire became the faces of colonialism and thus the targets of fear, violence, and discrimination (Nawab, 2017). Indianness from a Burmese perspective became monolithic, without regards to adherence to Islam or Hinduism or the amount of time having lived on Burmese land. In a more contemporary sense, it has now become effortless for the current present Burmese state and people to align the existence of Rohingya people in Rakhine State with the colonial presence of Indian people, many of whom were Muslim (Burke, 2016 & Nawab, 2017). It is this legacy of colonial exploitation with respect to both Indian and Burmese people that plays primarily into the present fear, resentment, and ultimate violent disregard of the existence of the Rohingya people today (Nawab, 2017).

It is also worthy to introduce the Rakhine people, the dominant ethnic group of Rakhine State, who have historically occupied space in anti-colonial movements and protested against the military regime (Burke, 2016), and attempted to advocate for a semblance of autonomy in the Rakhine State following independence from Britain (Southwick, 2015). A key point in developing a Rakhine political identity has been reacting against a purported uptick in the population (and thus political power) of the state's Muslim communities; these reactions have been in existence since anti-colonial movements as Rakhine nationalist leaders and Muslim community leaders both made claims for separatism from the colonial, and later, postcolonial government (Burke, 2016 & Southwick, 2015).

In further analyzing the Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar, it is imperative to reaffirm the ethnic subjects within this essay – the Rohingya and Burmese (further broken down into the

Rakhine ethnic group as well) are the primary contemporary actors. In a postcolonial context, the British are the former colonizers of Myanmar with their presence still felt institutionally and territorially (Ferguson, 2015). While the Rakhine State is the principal location of the violent atrocities committed against the Rohingyas (Aung-Thwin, 2014), the context in which their existence and place in the state are examined takes place as a discourse within a larger national/postcolonial consciousness that values ethnic and religious identity (Nawab, 2017 & Burke, 2016).

Central to the degeneration of the Rohingya people by the Burmese government is the continual use of the term "Bengali" to describe them in a blatant attempt to place the people outside of Burmese borders and thusly deny their claims to both citizenship and peaceful existence within the Rakhine State (Aung-Thwin, 2014, Southwick, 2015 & Burke, 2016). "Bengali" as an official moniker to describe the Rohingya has even waded from governmental to Burmese academic discourses (Aung-Thwin, 2014). Ethnic identity, synonymous with membership within the 135 "indigenous" ethnic races originally enumerated by the British, is the center point to the cohesion of Burmese politics (Burke, 2016 & Nawab, 2017). Yet, this cohesion comes at the cost of outright systemically ignoring the existence of populations that have emerged from colonialism in Myanmar such as Overseas Chinese, Burmese Indians, Anglo-Burmese (Eurasians of Burmese and European descent) and indeed Rohingyas (Ferguson, 2015). The social construct of *luumyo* or ethnic identity was historically fluid in practice before its codification by both the British colonial administration (Ferguson, 2015) and the postcolonial government (Nawab, 2017). In this regard, the system of Myanmar's 135 ethnic groups - of which many minority ethnic groups have taken issue with its accuracy (Ferguson, 2015) - and thus its power in politically and socially isolating the Rohingya people, is ultimately a colonial

construction appropriated into postcolonial nationalism. The binary of Burmese/Rohingya or Burmese/"Bengali" reimagines the original border lines drawn by colonial powers that remain in use by the successor state. Indeed, precolonial historical accounts detail the existence of Muslim communities in Rakhine State for centuries (Southwick, 2015), rendering the constructed borders in that space arbitrary.

Most contemporary global discourses have acknowledged the statelessness and denied citizenship of the Rohingya (Southwick, 2015, Ferguson, 2015 & Nawab, 2017). Yet this erasure only shadows the violence that surrounds them in everyday life. Rohingya communities in the Rakhine State have been the subjects of communal violence with ethnic Rakhines, property seizure, massacres and rape at the hands of the Burmese military forces, and village burnings perpetrated by the two groups in tandem with one another (Aung-Thwin, 2014, Southwick, 2015, Burke, 2016 & Nawab, 2017). Internally, anti-Muslim uprisings, largely stoked by the Rohingya crisis but also informed by historical context, have spread as far inwards as the city of Mandalay in central Myanmar (Burke, 2016) and as far south as the commercial capital of Yangon (Nawab, 2017). Regionally, thousands of Rohingyas have languished in detention camps, fallen to human trafficking and forced labor, or simply perished on their journeys across the border to Bangladesh, or across the sea to Thailand and Malaysia (Southwick, 2015). This tumultuous experience within (and beyond) Myanmar's borders and national consciousness places the Rohingya along the lines of a subaltern group, in that their very existence is violently unwelcome within the independent state of Myanmar. This is not solely due to their marginalization – in the positioning of the Rohingya as an "other" within the state, the Rohingya are inherently at odds with the purported homogeneity of Burmese nationalism. The phenomenon of Muslim community leaders in the Rakhine State urging Rohingyas to group-identify as Rohingya and

thus reject the label of "Bengali" (Burke, 2016) harkens to a marginalized and disenfranchised group attempting to "rethink history from the perspective of the subaltern" (Prakash, 1994) and assert their own narratives that have been disregarded by the larger Burmese nationalist consciousness.

Burmese Buddhist leaders, operating through the lens of Burmese nationalism, have historically been one of the most visible faces of anti-colonial movements (Nawab, 2017) and present-day political activism (Aung-Thwin, 2014), and this religious centricity has rendered those of the Islamic faith as not "truly" deserving a place in the independent, postcolonial state (Nawab, 2017). This is not quite unlike the case of Sri Lanka, another former British colony, where Buddhist and Sinhala identities became intertwined during anti-colonial nationalism and postcolonial statehood; this has led to strife with other non-Buddhist groups in the country (Rambukwella, 2018). In this de/construction, Burmese nationalism can only flourish in relation to the prevalence of Buddhism, just as the appellation of Rohingyas being "Bengali" and "Muslim" (and therefore stateless) can only operate in opposition to "Burmese", "Rakhine", or "Buddhist" identities that imply indigenous claims to the land in Rakhine State.

In late 2017, two Reuters journalists and Burmese nationals named Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were arrested by Burmese police for their role in investigating and publicizing a massacre of Rohingya villagers at the hands of the Burmese military. Following a trial that went into the next year, the two journalists were finally sentenced to seven years in prison on September 3rd, 2018. The official charge – the two journalists broke the Official Secrets Act, a colonial-era act dating from 1923 that punishes those who obtain official documentation that can then be useful to an "enemy" (Chalmers, 2018). Latent within this ruling is the association of the journalists' work – investigating a village massacre committed against the Rohingya people –

with supporting the state's imagined "enemy". In this case, the Burmese/Rohingya binary indicates the Burmese government's belief in an Us/Them or a State/Enemy discourse. Yet even with the international outrage (Chalmers, 2018) this recent occurrence is in no way surprising, nor is this discourse a novel one. The journalists' imprisonment mirrors the other colonial-era discourses, institutions, and actions that have been re-appropriated into the independent state's operations and mindset (Ferguson, 2015 & Burke, 2016). The official implication that the Rohingyas are "Bengali" enemies of the state is in line with the state's denial of citizenship to the group (Nawab, 2017 & Chalmers, 2018). In this regard, the sentencing is nothing new; it is merely a highly-publicized manifestation of what has been occurring for decades.

The acknowledgement of the plight of the Rohingya people comes with the acceptance of the post/colonial conditions that have allowed it. It is imperative to understand the de/constructions of the discourses that have come to shape modern Myanmar and the existence of the Rohingya people. There is no neutrality in the language and concepts used in defining this conflict – it is all seeped in Myanmar's colonial history as former rulers sought to dominate in their own manner at the expense of the people already there (Ferguson, 2015). From the constructs of national borders, national consciousness, ethnic identity, and a pro/anti-state binary emerges the crisis of the Rohingya people in Rakhine State.

In Myanmar, where Buddhism is synonymous with Burmese-ness and where anti-colonial/nationalist Buddhist spaces have historically been inherently xenophobic (Nawab, 2017), the implication is clear: to be Rohingya is not to be Burmese. There is no seat at the table, figuratively or literally, for those who have never existed in the national imagination.

It is only when all implicated actors - the Burmese government as the gatekeepers of Burmese postcolonialism, the British as the importers of Eurocentric dichotomies and institutions

(Ferguson, 2015 & Burke, 2016), the ethnic Rakhine people as a "minority within a minority state" (Burke, 2016), Buddhist-Burmese nationalists as the loudspeakers of Islamophobia (Nawab, 2017), and finally the Rohingya as the subalterns, without a formal state to represent them (Southwick, 2015) – are examined as the consequences of decades of imperialist expansion and exploitation, can an effective and critical discourse of the Rohingya crisis emerge.

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